

## Three



*Well, the new part of my life didn't plan out as I hoped. I no longer have a schoolhouse to teach in. I don't want to write about what happened, so I will just start over here.*

—From the journal of Jenny Millard

Jenny heard the children before she saw them. By the time they entered the schoolyard, the children had quieted and were listening intently to their teacher's instructions. Jenny's heart leaped at seeing her friend.

What if Livvy wasn't happy to see her? Her stomach flipped, and her face flushed with heat at the thought of being rejected in front of this fine gentleman. She glanced his way as her mind raced with what thoughts he had of her.

But none of it mattered. She had no other options for a place to sleep for a night or two until she could figure out where she would go next. Livvy wouldn't say no to that, would she?

Ren put his hand out as if to protect her from something as

they approached. Taking his lead, she stopped before they were too close to interrupt. Then her gaze landed on the same rooster that had accosted them earlier.

She fisted her hands before she could stop herself. Were the students in danger? It didn't seem like it, but she was ready to fight. Roosters were mean. They would defend their territory and peck at fingers if the person attached to the fingers wasn't quick enough. She learned that lesson along with another at the young age of seven, the first time she ever collected the eggs herself.

The other being, if all the eggs dropped, there would be no breakfast for the entire family. The look of disappointment from her mother was something Jenny never wanted to have directed at her again. Yet, Jenny discovered as the years went by, her ma would scowl often at Jenny. It was not a fun feeling. And why Jenny hated to let down anyone.

Admitting to Livvy she failed two schools would not be easy.

Fidgeting with her skirt, her stomach growled. She sneaked a peek at Ren.

He glanced her way, eyes glimmering.

Her stomach dipped and chose to growl again. She forced a smile, then searched the area, counting to ten.

It was then she saw the schoolhouse. Her lips parted. Neither of her one-room buildings had ever looked this shiny. They were built with broken pieces of wood, where gaps leaked both heat and cold. Her townspeople, too focused on surviving, had given it no mind.

Here, several men finished whitewashing the outside walls. And inside through the window openings more men installed brand-new glass. One man backed into another, and they shared a laugh at the interaction. She might even call it friendly.

Her muscles eased a bit. People were kind here. Welcoming. She wouldn't be jeered at for existing.

Jenny shifted her feet, ignoring the pain that shot up her leg, not knowing what to do next.

One of the girls tapped Livvy on the arm and pointed toward them.

Her senses on high alert, Jenny felt ready to faint. This was the mo—

"Jenny!" Livvy exclaimed. She set down her book and rushed toward Jenny, holding her skirts up a little higher than normal so she could walk faster. That was a good sign, wasn't it? "What a pleasant surprise. What are you doing here? How long are you here? What are you doing here? Oh, I said that already, didn't I? Let me hug you."

Jenny opened her mouth, but knew if she said anything, her eyes would leak out the unshed tears forming, and her voice would croak.

"I'm so grateful to see you. I have missed you tremendously."

"I've missed you too," Jenny replied, relieved her voice didn't wobble. She closed her eyes as Olivia squeezed her hard and held on for a few extra minutes. Her heart sang at having someone hug her. Had she ever had this much enthusiasm in a greeting before? A memory she would pocket to cherish for the rest of her days.

Livvy stepped back and faced the giant of a man standing next to her. "Hello." She reached out her hand. "I'm Miss Carmichael, the schoolteacher."

Ren stared at Livvy's hand. Multiple expressions crossed his face.

Jenny frowned. What was wrong? He was so talkative and helpful with her, but now he was completely closed off. From the corner of her eye, Jenny saw him make a fist and then

partially open his hand. She hadn't noticed before, but his hand showed different pigment colors with raised bumps all over his thumb, like his face. Was he embarrassed? Unable to shake hands? Her heart thumped faster, and she gestured toward him. "This is Ren. He saw me being clumsy and trip, and then he came to my rescue."

He glanced at her, surprise all over his face.

Jenny smiled at Ren, and he turned and nodded to Livvy, then proceeded to place his scarred hand behind his back.

Livvy lowered her hand and glanced between the two of them, smiling the entire time. Something about her glowed. Did she look more at peace than before she came to Washton?

Her friend grinned at Jenny. "What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be teaching in your school?" Livvy asked.

Jenny faced Livvy and pinched her lips. She didn't want Ren to know this, but what else could she do? She closed her eyes. "Yes. But they closed the school and let me go. I only had enough money to get here. I hope you don't mind I came."

"Oh, nonsense. I'm glad you did. I've been staying back at the Martins', and you can come with me." She held up her hand. "Don't say a word. You can share the bedroom with me, and I know you eat like a bird anyway, so it won't be an issue to add another place setting to the table for supper tonight."

For the first time in the last twelve hours, Jenny breathed out a sigh of relief. She would have a roof over her head and food to eat. There would be no need to fret over her predicament tonight. She would worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

Livvy looked over her shoulder. All the children were watching intently. And the rooster too. He had jumped on the tree stump where Livvy had sat. "Why don't you wait for me to

finish up here. It should only be thirty more minutes. Then we can walk to the Martins' together."

Ren cleared his throat. "If it's all right with you, miss, I really should get back to the smithy. I could carry your luggage over to—

Livvy chimed in. "That would be wonderful. It's Mayor Martin's home. The white house at the end of Main Street. You can't miss it."

He nodded and glanced at Jenny. "That way, you don't need to worry about it."

Jenny bit her lip. She didn't want to have her belongings leave her sight, but there was no way she could carry it herself. So tired, she might topple over if the wind blew hard. But could she trust him?

His lips twitched. "I promise to take it straight there, and it will be waiting for you when you arrive."

Livvy tugged on her arm. "Come and sit down with me, and I'll introduce you to my students. With everything going on, I could use your help."

Jenny instantly stood taller. Did they need more than one teacher here? She stepped forward, then stopped and faced Ren. "Thank you. For everything. I couldn't have made it all this way without your help. You are a true knight of service."

Livvy gasped and covered her mouth. "Oh. Don't mind me. It's just that I've said those exact words before to someone. And, well ... knights are rare, and hard to find, and not part of the plan sometimes. I'll explain more later."

Jenny's brows furrowed. What was she talking about?

Livvy waved to the children. "I'm coming." She looked over her shoulder. "You ready, Jenny?"

Jenny glanced at Ren, wanting to say more, but his back was to her, and he headed down the hill. An ache formed in her chest. Would she ever see him again?



THE SUITCASE BUMPED against Ren's leg as he headed back the way he came.

He should've said goodbye but couldn't get the words out. For that was what it had to be. *Goodbye*. He cringed as he replayed the interaction with the teacher. He was unprepared for a woman to reach out a hand to shake like a man. Reacted too slowly.

And then Miss Millard noticed his deformity.

He squeezed his hand closed and let the residual pain from the tightness in the skin numb the other emotions flowing through him.

Her hesitation over him handling her belongings punched him in the gut. There was no chance of continuing a friendship now. Although her words at the end confused him.

*A true knight of service.*

Why would she say that if she was horrified by his hand? He nodded his head as a thought clicked in his thick-headed brain. Maybe she saw him only as a servant. And did the only polite thing she could. Don't acknowledge the ugly. Focus on the task at hand.

And she needed his help.

His shoulders relaxed slightly. It was better than an outright rejection. Something he could accept. He would stay as far away from her as possible. Hide in the smithy. Help out in the background.

His stomach roiled at the thought of having to move on—again. Years of rejection from others hadn't softened the blow. And the schoolhouse behind him brought to the forefront painful memories of the taunting from his past.

With his ability to hold a conversation tapped out, he glanced at the luggage and cringed. Why had he offered to

help? He should've just left. But he had wanted to make sure the beautiful woman he had just met could get her belongings where she needed them. So, he offered.

Now, he was stuck.

He turned the corner on Main Street and continued on the boardwalk.

A sound came from behind, and Ren swung around.

That stupid rooster clucked closer while staring Ren down.

*Screech.*

"Shoo." Ren shook his head, turned, and headed down the boardwalk. The fowl following him did not help his mood. Thankfully, most people were not out and about, and he didn't have to bear his teeth in a resemblance of a smile and scare anyone.

*Screech.*

Why was this bird following him?

Ren's long legs moved him first by an empty storefront, then the general store, a new café, and then the mayor's office. The white house mentioned by Miss Carmichael stood at the center of the cross-street. Stepping up onto the porch, he raised his hand to knock.

The door swung open, and a lady about the age of his ma, smiled at him. "Yes, may I help you?"

"Uh." He lifted the ragged brown suitcase with his left hand, keeping his right one hidden. "Miss Carmichael asked me to deliver this to your home. It's Miss Millard's. She's come to visit." Based on the revelation about her job disappearing, he didn't think it was just a visit, but it wasn't his place to say anything.

"Oh, wonderful." She clasped her hands to her chest. "Another daughter to look after." She opened the screen. "Won't you please come in and put it in the bedroom over there?" The cantankerous rooster squawked louder. The kind

woman smiled at the bird. “Bert, I see you. Thanks for making sure he found us.”

Bert chirped and flapped his wings, and ran back down the street. If Ren didn’t know better, he’d think the rooster could understand everything the mayor’s wife said. Ren shook his head to clear it. He really needed to stay in the forge and pound metal all day.

His gaze moved from the bird to the opened door with the woman and the motherly expression on her face, welcoming him into her home. Unease swept through him, but he ducked his head and followed her gesture to the room she mentioned. Setting down the load in his hands, he settled his palms behind his back and headed straight to the front door to exit.

The kind woman stepped in front of him. “Would you care for a cup of lemonade or tea? Where are my manners? I’m Chrissy Martin.” And she held out her hand. “My husband is Mayor Arthur Martin.”

And for the second time today, he stalled. He couldn’t be rude to the mayor’s wife.

He pulled his left hand from behind and glanced down. “I’m sorry, my hands are all dirty. I don’t mean to be rude. My name is Ren. I work at the Smithy.” He glanced at her sheepishly.

“Oh, you’re the person helping Gideon out? I’ve heard all about you, and I’m so thankful you showed up when you did. We need someone young and strong with all the railway work being done.”

“It’s nice to meet you ma’am. I really need to be getting back.”

“Chrissy. Please.” She reached for his arm.

He stilled. “What?”

She patted his arm and then let go. “Call me Chrissy. We will have you over for dinner soon.”



There was no way he would subject them to his scars over a meal. But he could deal with saying no another time. “Thank you for the offer. I really must go.” He focused on the door, counting his steps to ease his anxiousness. One, two, three, four. Opening the door, he nearly ran down the porch steps and into the warm sunshine to get away from the persistent kindness of Mrs. Martin.

“Thanks for stopping by,” she called out.

He halted, and a swirl of dust skated across the tips of his boots. Looking over his shoulder, he waved with his left hand. Soon, he’d be back working hot iron in hot flames. Anything was better than the stifling conversation in the mayor’s house, even the forge.

But, it was nice to know Miss Millard would be met with kindness. She looked as if she needed some.

That’s why he’d offered his help. Because she was someone in need.

He stepped onto the boardwalk, heading back on the other side of the street, keeping his head down and walking as briskly as he could without drawing attention to himself. He didn’t want any more encounters. He’d had enough today. Although, he didn’t regret helping Miss Millard. Something about her drew him to her. Maybe it was a nudge from God, but he sensed something more, like when his heart thumped double-time when he held her in his arms. He shook his head. He sure didn’t need complications if he planned to stay in Washton.

Cutting through the alley between the smithy and the livery, he entered from the back. His body relaxed as he set foot into the darkened room. Clanking sounds echoed off the walls as he grabbed his apron off the hook and slid it over his neck. This is where he felt the most comfortable. This is where he

could hide and not worry about upsetting anyone. The shop was dark, poorly lit, and warm. Home.

“There you are.” The pounding stopped. “Thought you might’ve left and wasn’t coming back.”

Ren grunted. He had thought about it. But where would he go?

“I can see you’re not interested in talking, but Luke Taylor is in front wanting to go over the design of the gate you said you would make for him. Hopefully, he can understand your mumbling.”

Ren placed his gloves on his hands and headed toward the front.

“Before I forget, did you enjoy your break?”

Ren grunted again. And then found his manners as he paused at the door. “Yes. I helped someone who needed assistance, so it took me longer to get back. I’ll stay later tonight to make up for the lost time.”

There was a long pause.

“You don’t have to do that. With both of us working for the next few hours, we can finish today’s work, no problem.”